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Evaluating a Marriage Education Program for Low-Resource Families: The *Family Connections in Alabama* Project

Program Impact Summary

Francesca Adler-Baeder, Ph.D., CFLE, *Principal Investigator*

Joe Pittman, Ph.D., *Consultant*

Laura Lippert, GRA

Jackie Pflieger, GRA

Brian Higginbotham, M.S., GRA

Sarah Armstrong, GRA

Amy Long, GRA

Auburn University, Alabama

adlerfr@auburn.edu

in collaboration with

Alicia Luckie, M.S., *Project Director*

Lisa Castaldo, M.S., *Program Manager*

Marian Loftin, Executive Director, CTF



OVERVIEW

In January of 2003, the U.S. Office of Child Support Enforcement, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services funded the "Family Connections in Alabama" (FCA) project as a 12-month "Special Improvement Project" (SIP) to pilot marriage education for low-resource parents and to promote family and relationship strength. The Alabama Children's Trust Fund (CTF), in partnership with Auburn University's Department of Human Development and Family Studies, and with the support of the Alabama Department of Human Resources and the Alabama Office of Child Support Enforcement, launched the FCA project through four community pilot sites. The project tested a curriculum newly developed by Michigan State University Extension specifically for the target audience, based on studies of fragile families and the barriers to family stability entitled, "Caring for My Family." Topics included: the importance of family stability and the benefits of healthy couple and married relationships, definitions of healthy and unhealthy relationships, self-care, communication skills in relationships, co-parenting skills, the importance of fathers, financial management, goal-setting, and decision-making. Goals for the project centered on strength-building in individual, couple, and family functioning. Both the program implementation process and the receptivity of the participants and the facilitators to the program were also of interest and an important part of the program evaluation study.

METHODS.

Implementation Plan.

The FCA project is a collaboration of several public and private agencies and organizations, both state and local level. Education programs (6 – 10 sessions; a minimum of 10 lessons) were delivered through agencies that currently access the project target populations with existing family service programs. The agencies are the Mobile County Health Department's TEEN Center (local public agency), Choctaw County Alabama Cooperative Extension agency (local public agency), Parents and Children Together (PACT) in Morgan County (private, nonprofit), and the Sylacauga Alliance for Family Enhancement (SAFE) Family Services Center in Talladega County (private, nonprofit). The targeted counties access both rural and urban populations. The majority of families in these communities are low-income and ethnically diverse. The project utilized the trust that has been built between each of the agencies and individuals in their communities and takes advantage of existing infrastructure – personnel, equipment, facilities, and services (e.g., transportation, childcare).

Sample.

The project targeted low-resource, nonmarried couples who were either expecting a child or had a child under age 3 (i.e., fragile families). 162 individuals participated in the program; 126 women, 36 men. Fifty participants attended as a couple; 90 attended without their partner (i.e., partner could not attend); 22 attended singly (i.e., had a strong interest in the program, but were not currently in a couple relationship). Completion rates were high, with only 14% attrition. Pre- and post-program questionnaires were returned for 138 participants who completed at least 10 lessons. Participants were primarily African-American (64%) and low-income. The vast majority had a high school education or less (77.5%) and reported a household income of \$14,999 or less (74%). Participants were primarily in their mid-20's and were not younger than 18.

Measures.

The evaluation questionnaire contained over 300 items adapted from social science measures that assess aspects of individual and couple functioning, including level of commitment, trust, happiness/satisfaction, and types of interactional patterns in the relationship. Also included were measures of individual empowerment, distress level, and co-parenting attitudes and practices. Post-program questionnaires had questions on the quality of the program and open-ended questions on the participant's experience in the program and perceived benefits of the program. In addition, data were gathered from facilitators regarding their experiences with the program implementation.

PROGRAM IMPACT RESULTS

Quantitative measures.

Analyses revealed statistically significant *increases* in:

- **Individual empowerment.** This included recognition of individual strengths, ability to cope with stress, recognition of unhealthy and unsafe relationships, ability to take action in unsafe relationships, individual problem-solving skills.
- **Couple quality.** Increases in reported level of trust in the relationship, level of happiness in the relationship, and ability to problem-solve as a team.
- **Mother's support of the father** (i.e., better co-parenting attitudes and practices).

Statistically significant *decreases* were found in:

- **Individual distress level**
- **Level of verbal aggression in the relationship** (both their own and their partner's)

The program impact as measured did not differ by gender, or by whether participants came as a couple or attended without their partner. In other words, all participants appeared to benefit from the program in similar ways.

Quality of the Program

- Participants rated the facilitators' work and the quality of the program very high (i.e., 4.56 and 4.4, respectively on a scale of 1-5).
- The vast majority of participants strongly agreed that they would recommend the program to others they know (mean = 4.51).

Qualitative Responses

Focus groups were conducted with facilitators. Participants completed open-ended questions. Data were transcribed and coded for themes. Results indicate overwhelmingly positive responses to the program. Facilitators expressed the following themes:

- **They enjoyed and were comfortable with offering the curriculum.**
 - *"participants were more responsive to this curriculum and topics than any other program I've worked with"*
- **The educational learning environment is non-threatening.**
- **The program content is relevant and important to the target audience.**
- **Talking about unhealthy and unsafe relationships is very valuable.**
 - *"[A participant] said to me that she wished she had known about this program then [during her past relationship] because she is out of that situation, but it took her awhile to get out of the situation..."*
- **Participants desire more long-term programs**
 - *"we had some sessions where they didn't want to leave...a 2 hour session turned into a 3 ½ hour session!"*
 - *"They asked if they could keep coming back"*
- **Participants seemed to be building a support network among their groups.**
 - *"They had become a close-knit group and were comfortable with each other... the fact that they can create their own support system like that outside of an agency is so important...I think that's another wonderful benefit of this particular project."*

Participants described:

- **an awareness of the importance of healthy relationships**
 - *"I wish I'd had this class before...I know I was in an abusive, unhealthy relationship before..."*
- **improvements in relationships**
 - *"It pulled me and my partner closer together...it gave me a better heart"*
 - *"Me and my baby dad was not getting along until we started this class..."*
- **improved individual skills**
- **commitment to working on their relationship**
 - *"..I want to keep our family together"*
- **goals centered on family stability and healthy relationships**
 - *"It helped me to make better decisions concerning my family"*

When asked about their **goals**, participants wrote the following:

- *To get married and grow strong as a family.*
- *The very best for my children, the best for my marriage, and that we will all grow closer to each other.*
- *to get married and teach values to my child*
- *To spend more time with my family and to build a strong family*
- *To have strong family values and be in a loving environment*
- *Stay together to raise a healthy child*
- *to build a better relationship and make a stable life together*
- *To continue with my family in good and bad times.*
- *to become a successful family and to maintain our relationship together*
- *happier 2. financially stable 3. want my children to have a better relationship with their father. 4. want to get married and have a complete family.*
- *To keep all of us together, and work out all problems we have. And to be there for each other.*
- *To maintain our relationship and be a good father*
- *For me to have a real relationship w/ a good man and for them to have a daddy. For me, to take care of me and babies without DHR. For us to spend more time together, set and prepare our future together and live right.*
- *To get married & move out on are own.*
- *To get married & to have a healthy relationship and family.*
- *To keep my family together and be able to provide for them financially and emotional[ly]*

SUMMARY

Very little work has been done to evaluate and understand program effects of marriage education services, particularly among more vulnerable populations. Results of this pilot project and evaluation study are promising and suggest that offering marriage education services to low-resource parents may be beneficial. This project may provide the first such empirical documentation. We can interpret some desired program effects in several important areas in individual and couple functioning. Ratings of the program and curriculum by participants and facilitators were consistently high. In addition, facilitators were clearly convinced of the usefulness of the curriculum and what it adds to their agencies' family service offerings. Participants related that the curriculum resonated with them and provided information that could be used to move away from unhealthy relationships and to intentionally build healthy relationships and marriages.